

## Antebellum America – Lesson 3

***It Matters Because...*** *The people of the United States established a constitution and survived a second war with Britain. In antebellum America—the period before the Civil War—Americans faced a new question: Could they work together to create a strong and prosperous nation?*

### **The Nation**

After the War of 1812, the United States entered an “Era of Good Feelings.” A sense of nationalism swept the country. Riding this wave of nationalism was Democratic-Republican James Monroe, the nation’s fifth president.

### **The Missouri Compromise**

The Era of Good Feelings could not ward off the nation’s growing sectional disputes. Missouri’s application for statehood as a slave state stirred up the divisive issue of whether slavery should expand westward. In 1819 the Union consisted of 11 free and 11 slave states. Admitting any new state would upset the balance in the Senate and touch off a bitter struggle over political power. Many Northerners opposed extending slavery into the West, believing it to be morally wrong. The South feared that if slavery could not expand, then new free states would give the North enough votes in the Senate to outlaw slaveholding.

A solution emerged when Maine, which for decades had been part of Massachusetts, requested admission to the Union as a separate state. The Senate voted to admit Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state. This solution to the controversy kept the balance in the Senate. Senator Jesse Thomas of Illinois then proposed an amendment that would prohibit slavery in the Louisiana Purchase territory north of Missouri’s southern border. Slavery could expand into Arkansas Territory south of Missouri, but not in the rest of the Louisiana Purchase. By a very close vote, carefully managed by Henry Clay of Kentucky, the House of Representatives voted to accept the Missouri Compromise. However, this merely postponed a debate over the future of slavery.

### **American Nationalism**

Following the War of 1812, the Federalist Party rapidly lost political influence. Partisan infighting had largely ended because only one major political party—the Democratic-Republicans—remained. As Monroe’s presidency began, focus shifted from world affairs to national growth. In 1823—while many of Spain’s colonies were fighting for independence— President Monroe proclaimed what became known as the Monroe Doctrine. It declared the United States’s opposition to European interference in the Americas.

The charter of the First Bank of the United States had expired in 1811. In 1816 Representative John C. Calhoun of South Carolina introduced a bill proposing the Second Bank of the United States. The bill passed, giving the bank power to issue national currency and to control state banks.

Inexpensive British goods threatened to put American manufacturers out of business. Congress responded with the Tariff of 1816. Unlike earlier revenue tariffs, which provided income for the federal government, this tariff was a protective tariff that worked to raise the prices of imports.

Under Chief Justice John Marshall, the Supreme Court issued decisions that helped strengthen the national government. Between 1816 and 1824, Marshall interpreted the Constitution broadly to support federal power. In the 1819 case *McCulloch v. Maryland*, the Court decided that Congress had the authority to establish the Second Bank of the United States. It ruled that the federal government could use any method that was necessary and proper for carrying out its powers as long as the method was not expressly forbidden by the Constitution. The ruling meant that a state could not interfere with a

federal agency working within that state's borders.

## **Industrialization and the Transportation Revolution**

The Industrial Revolution, which had begun in Europe, spread to the United States during this time. Businesses began large-scale manufacturing using complex machines and organized workforces in factories. As transportation expanded, manufacturers sold their wares nationwide or abroad instead of just locally.

In 1806 Congress funded a major east-west highway called the National Road. Private businesses and state and local governments also built roads and canals. The invention of the steamboat transformed river transportation. By 1835, more than 700 steamboats, called riverboats, traveled on the nation's waterways. Railroads also appeared in the early 1800s. Industrialist Peter Cooper built the *Tom Thumb*, a tiny but powerful locomotive. The new trains helped settle the West and expand trade across the country.

## **Life in the North**

Between 1815 and 1860, more than 5 million foreigners came to America. While thousands became farmers in the rural West, many others settled in cities, providing a steady source of cheap labor. More than 44,000 Irish arrived in 1845 after a widespread famine in their homeland.

Not all Americans welcomed the new immigrants. In the 1800s, many Americans were anti-Catholic, and the arrival of predominantly Catholic Irish and German immigrants led to the rise of nativist groups and a push for laws banning immigrants from holding public office. In 1854 delegates from some of these groups formed the American Party, which came to be called the Know-Nothings.

Owners of the early factory mills expressed a paternalistic concern for their workers. The relationship between management and labor, however, became more strained whenever prices slumped and wages dropped. By 1860, factory workers numbered roughly 1.3 million. Men, women, and children alike typically toiled for 12 or more hours a day. Hoping to gain higher wages or shorter workdays, some workers began to organize in labor unions. During the late 1820s and early 1830s, about 300,000 men and women belonged to some form of union. Most employers refused to bargain with them, and the courts often saw them as unlawful conspiracies that limited free enterprise.

Despite the trend toward urban and industrial growth, agriculture remained the country's leading economic activity. Until the late 1800s, farming employed more people and produced more wealth than any other kind of work. Northern farmers produced enough to sell their surplus in the growing Eastern cities and towns. As one Ohio newspaper reporter wrote in 1851: "As far as the eye can stretch in the distance nothing but corn and wheat fields are to be seen; and on some points in the Scioto Valley as high as a thousand acres of corn may be seen in adjoining fields, belonging to some eight or ten different proprietors."

## **The Land of Cotton**

Farming was even more important in the South, which lagged behind the North in industrialization. The South had few big cities and less industry. Compared with the many textile mills and factories in the North, the South had only scattered iron works, textile mills, and coal, iron, salt, and copper mines. Together, these accounted for only 16 percent of the nation's total manufacturing. The South thrived on the production of several major cash crops, including cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugarcane. No crop would play a greater role in the South's fortunes during this period than cotton. At first, however, profits from cotton were small, owing to the great amount of labor needed to produce it.

## Cotton Becomes King

Removing cotton seeds by hand from the fluffy bolls, or cotton pods, was so tedious that it took a worker an entire day to separate a pound of cotton lint. In 1793 Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin—*gin* being short for *engine*—a machine that quickly removed cotton seeds from the bolls. Cotton production soared, and by 1860, Southern cotton accounted for nearly two-thirds of the total export trade of the United States. Southerners began saying, rightly, “Cotton is King.”

Cotton was grown in a wide belt stretching from inland South Carolina west into Texas. The spread of cotton plantations boosted the Southern economy, and this greatly increased the demand for enslaved labor. Congress had outlawed the foreign slave trade in 1808. However, a high birthrate among enslaved women—encouraged by slaveholders—kept the population growing.

## Slavery

The overwhelming majority of enslaved African Americans toiled in the fields on small farms. Some became house servants, while others worked in trades. All enslaved persons suffered indignities. State slave codes forbade enslaved men and women from owning property, leaving a slaveholder’s premises without permission, or testifying in court against a white person. Laws even banned them from learning to read and write.

Many enslaved men and women found ways to actively resist the dreadful lifestyle forced on them. Some quietly staged work slowdowns. Others broke tools or set fire to houses and barns. Still others risked beatings or mutilations by running away. Some enslaved persons turned to violence, killing their owners or plotting revolts.

Free African Americans occupied an ambiguous position in Southern society. In cities like Charleston and New Orleans, some were successful enough to become slaveholders themselves. Almost 200,000 free African Americans lived in the North, where slavery had been outlawed, but they still faced discrimination. Nonetheless, free African Americans in the North could organize their own churches and voluntary associations. They also were able to earn money from the jobs they held.

## The Age of Jackson

Andrew Jackson was elected president in the election of 1828, supported by rural and small-town voters. As president, Jackson actively tried to make the government more inclusive. He wanted ordinary citizens to play a role in government, and he supported the spoils system—the practice of giving people government jobs on the basis of party loyalty. Jackson had not been in office long before he had to focus on a national crisis that highlighted the growing rift between the North and the South.

South Carolina bought many needed goods from England and as a result, had to pay the high tariffs levied on those goods. When another tariff law was passed in 1832, South Carolina adopted an ordinance of nullification declaring the tariffs to be unconstitutional. Jackson regarded nullification as treason and sent a warship to Charleston. When Congress passed a bill that lowered tariffs gradually, South Carolina repealed its nullification of the tariff law.

Along with the nullification crisis, Jackson dismantled the Second Bank of the United States. Like most Westerners, and many working people in the East, he regarded the Bank as a monopoly that benefited the wealthy elite. He vetoed a bill that would have extended its charter and then withdrew all the government’s deposits, severely weakening the bank.

In his Inaugural Address, Jackson had declared his intention to move all Native Americans to the Great Plains. In 1830 Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act. The Cherokee in Georgia appealed to the Supreme Court, hoping to gain legal recognition of their territorial rights. Chief Justice Marshall supported this right in two decisions, both of which Jackson refused to carry out. In 1838 Martin Van

Buren, Jackson's successor, sent in the army to forcibly move the Cherokee. Roughly 2,000 Cherokee died in camps while waiting for the westward march. On the journey, which became known as the Trail of Tears, about 2,000 others died of starvation, disease, and exposure.

## **A Reforming Society**

During the mid-1800s, a number of reformers argued that no social vice caused more crime, poverty, or family hardship than the excessive consumption of alcohol. They advocated temperance, or moderation in the consumption of alcohol. Temperance groups formed across the country, preaching the evils of alcohol and urging people to give up liquor. In 1833 a number of groups formed a national organization, the American Temperance Union. In 1851 Maine passed the first state prohibition law, an example 12 other states followed by 1855. Other states passed "local option" laws, which allowed towns and villages to ban liquor sales.

## **Prisons, Asylums, and School Reform**

Some reformers focused on providing better facilities for prisoners and the insane. Many states replaced their overcrowded prisons with penitentiaries so prisoners would be rehabilitated, and by the beginning of the Civil War, most states had established public mental institutions to keep the mentally ill out of the prison system.

Many reformers sought to establish a system of public education. They focused on establishing elementary schools to teach all children the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and to instill a work ethic.

## **Women's Rights**

By the mid-1800s, the development of factories separated the home from the workplace. Men often left home to go to work, while women tended the home. As the reform movements of the 1830s grew, some women set out to create more educational opportunities and began promoting new ideas about their role in society. In 1848 activists Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Convention in New York. The convention issued the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, better known as the Seneca Falls Declaration. It began with words expanding on the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal. . . ." Stanton proposed that they focus on suffrage, or the right to vote, and the convention narrowly passed her proposal.

## **Abolitionism**

Of all the reform movements that began in the early 1800s, the most divisive was the one calling for abolition, or the immediate end to slavery. It polarized the nation and helped bring about the Civil War. Many of the nation's founders knew that the United States would have difficulty remaining true to its ideals of liberty and equality if it did not emancipate, or free, all enslaved people. Some religious groups argued that slavery was a sin.

Free African Americans took a prominent role in the movement. One of the most famous was Frederick Douglass, who had escaped from slavery in Maryland. Another key abolitionist was Sojourner Truth. She gained her freedom in 1827 when New York freed all enslaved persons in the state. Her eloquent and deeply religious antislavery speeches attracted huge crowds.